

RED DATA BIRD

A breeding pair of
Yellow-eared Parrots
Ognorhynchus icterotis
at their wax palm nest
entrance

No one foresaw the abundant Carolina Parakeet's *Conuropsis carolinensis* sudden demise and extinction in the early 1900s. Sadly, a century later, history is repeating itself and again the fight is on to save yet another enigmatic parrot from extinction.

Yellow-eared Parrot: back from the brink?

by Paul Salaman



Yellow-eared Parrots *Ognorhynchus icterotis* flying over central Colombia

In the early 1900s, the magnificent Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* – a large brilliant green and yellow parrot – was abundant across the High Andes of Colombia and northern Ecuador. However, by the 1980s it was clear the population of Yellow-eared Parrots was catastrophically declining. In the mid-1990s, the species had mysteriously vanished over much of its range and only two flocks, numbering fewer than 50 individuals, were known to survive. By early 1999, after a year of intensive searches across Colombia and Ecuador, this unique parrot had apparently completely vanished. All the traditional haunts had been either deforested or the species had been wiped out by mindless hunting – the hunters incorrectly blaming the species for ravaging maize crops. As if overnight, the Yellow-eared Parrot had become one of the most Critically Endangered species in the Americas.

With no further reports, and not a single individual in captivity, the worst was feared. Almost 100 years after the Carolina Parakeet's extinction in the wild, it appeared that yet another precious member of the

parrot family had all too suddenly fallen into oblivion.

In the 20th century, people have witnessed sharply declining populations of wildlife that have been unable to adapt and survive in the rapidly changing world as it has been sculptured to suit people's needs. Nowhere has this change been more strongly felt than in the tropics – where global biodiversity is concentrated and where people have sadly over-exploited the rich forests.

Conservation efforts have largely focused on vast expanses of tropical forest such as the Amazon, but smaller ecosystems, like those of the Andean slopes, have largely been overlooked. Yet BirdLife International's groundbreaking global assessment of Endemic Bird Areas (EBAs) has highlighted the importance of the Northern Andes region. This area, encompassed within Ecuador and Colombia, represents a total of 12 EBAs and hosts an astonishing 86 globally threatened bird species and 222 endemic bird species. Quite simply, the Northern Andes is the epicentre of global

biodiversity and the Yellow-eared Parrot is endemic to the montane forests found there. Little was known about the parrot's natural history, except that the species was highly nomadic and moved large distances across the Andes in search of fruiting hardwood trees. It was also known that the parrot was dependent for nesting, feeding and roosting upon Colombia's national tree, the Wax Palm *Ceroxylon quindiuense*, the world's tallest palm that grows up to 60 m tall. Sadly, throughout the 20th Century, the trees upon which the Yellow-eared Parrot depends have either been cut down for timber or clear-felled as a wave of intensive agricultural expansion has swept across the fertile volcanic soils of the Andes. The natural forest cover over the Northern Andes has decreased to less than 10% of its original extent. As the forests disappeared so did the parrots. The increasing scarcity of Yellow-eared Parrots meant that the rewards for obtaining captive birds were greater and the illegal trade in the birds that blossomed threatened to be the final nail in the coffin for the Yellow-eared Parrot. In Colombia, between 1992 and 1996, almost half the

1,540 birds confiscated from people trying illegally to smuggle them out of the country were parrots. But this number is clearly just the tip of the iceberg and perhaps 50 times this number avoided confiscation. Although millions of people world-wide keep parrots as pets, there is not a single known Yellow-eared Parrot presently surviving in captivity. And this is despite the fact that the species has been actively trapped for the pet trade. This highly social bird is quite unable to survive when placed in confinement – for example, in the late 1980s a farmer trapped 40 individuals out of a flock of 60 birds in Ecuador. Twenty died within 24 hours and all were dead within 48 hours.

Paul Salaman, with support from the Loro Parque Fundación, American Bird Conservancy and Fonds für bedrohte Papageien, and with the endorsement of the Antioquian Ornithology Society (SAO), instigated an emergency field project for the Yellow-eared Parrot in Colombia. *Proyecto Ognorhynchus* (named after the unique genus of the Yellow-eared Parrot) began efforts to locate and protect the species in Colombia. Initially it focused on the species's historic strongholds in the Central Andes, and field searches were backed up by a poster campaign through regional environmental government bodies. The posters asked farmers to report any sightings of the species. The first year's efforts proved entirely

fruitless – the species no longer inhabited traditional sites and its continued survival in the wild looked increasingly bleak.

Shortly before the search was due to end, a Colombian who had seen one of the campaign posters reported seeing the species in a remote valley of central Colombia. *Proyecto Ognorhynchus* fieldworker Bernabé López-Lanús visited the site and, as he wandered through glades of majestic wax palms in the late afternoon of 18 April 1999, Bernabé heard the faint but distinctive raucous screams of parrots. Suddenly, descending from the clouds above a breathtaking alpine-like landscape, two flocks of Yellow-eared Parrots swooped down. After almost a year of depressingly unsuccessful searches, Bernabé was delirious! A total of 61 Yellow-eared Parrots alighted in the towering wax palms overhead and clambered down the fronds in chattering masses to gorge themselves on bundles of ripening thumb-sized palm fruits.

Over the coming months, a wealth of information on the ecology and natural history of the Yellow-eared Parrot was gathered during round-the-clock observations. Within a week of rediscovering the species, another flock was located roosting in an adjacent secluded valley. Occasionally all 81 individuals would gather and socialise before roosting overnight in the

wax palms. Pairs and small groups chattered, preened and frolicked amongst the palms groves, often flying within feet of Bernabé as they played. Then, an exciting discovery was made – a nest with a chick being fed by adults was found in a tall dead palm stump. The nest was constantly monitored and protected, with the chick successfully fledging in mid-June.

After a year of searching in Colombia and adjacent Ecuador, it appears that *Proyecto Ognorhynchus* had uncovered the final enclave of the Yellow-eared Parrot. Immature birds dominate the group, indicating that the population has been increasing rapidly in recent years, but from a tiny base – perhaps just a handful of adults.

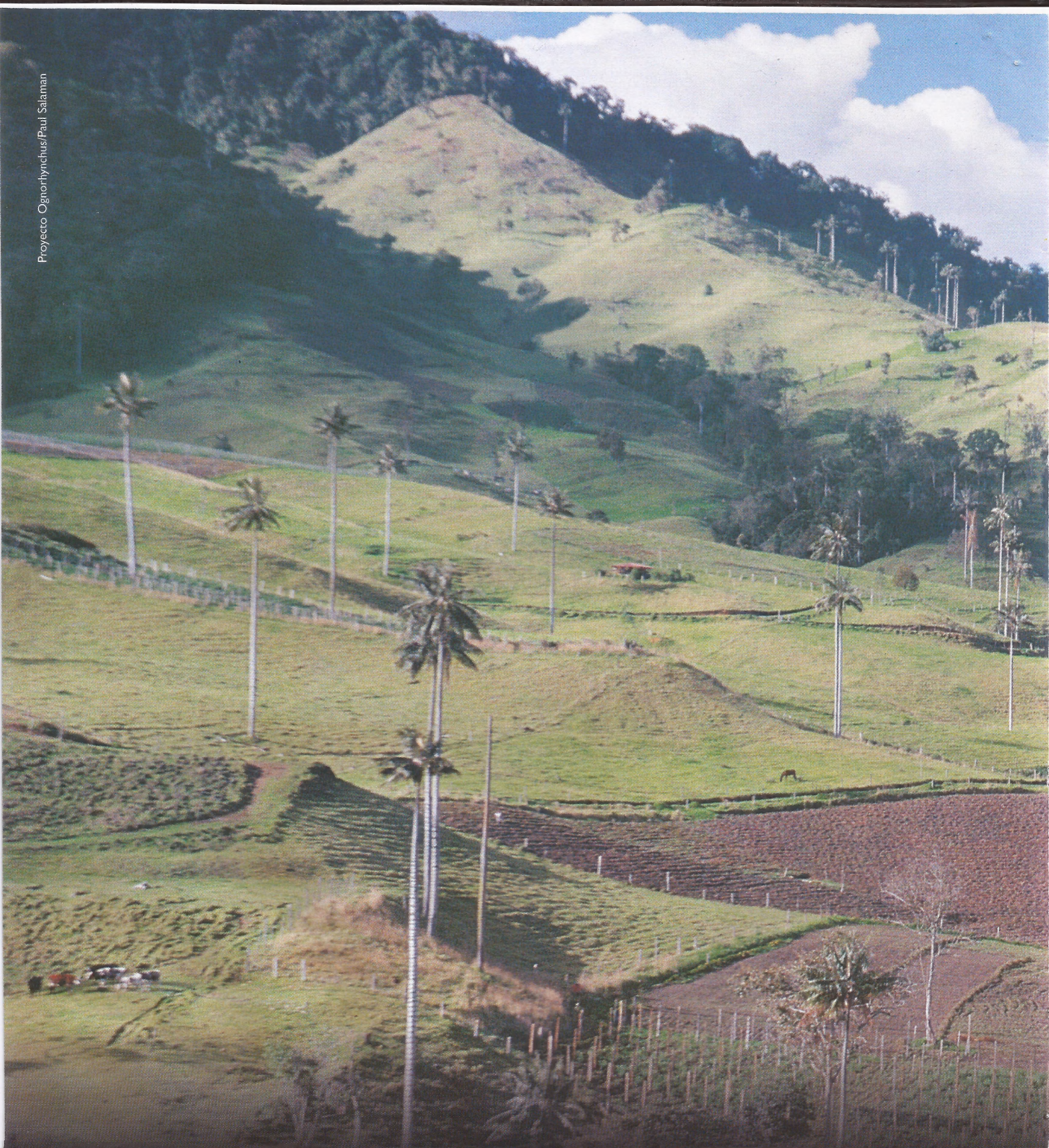
At first the reasons why this single population still survived were a mystery. Stories from the local community told how the birds had been actively hunted for food, chicks had been stolen from nests and the species almost driven to extinction at the site. Then, at a critical moment, members of a Colombian guerrilla movement in the area prohibited the commercialisation and hunting or capture of Yellow-eared Parrots and other wildlife in the region. They also imposed a total ban on cutting down wax palms. Under a strict *modus operandi*, the local inhabitants fully complied with the ban, so that the threat from hunting waned in this area. Ironically, thanks

Close-up: the Yellow-eared Parrot's *Ognorhynchus icterotis* awesome bill does little harm to sensitive tree seeds when consuming fruits

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Proyecto Ognorhynchus Paul Salaman



to the rebels, the Yellow-eared Parrot had become a beneficiary of Colombia's civil conflict.

However, this unofficial form of protection is neither permanent, nor will it continue to deter poachers. Furthermore, the Yellow-eared Parrot's long-term survival still hangs precariously in the balance as the wax palm upon which the species depends is itself in danger of extinction, with just a few thousand acres of groves remaining. *Proyecto Ognorhynchus* is therefore raising

funds to implement a multifaceted conservation programme, through environmental education, land protection and reforestation, to ensure the continuing survival of the Yellow-eared Parrot and its forest habitats. Fortunately, there has been enormous co-operation and enthusiasm from local farmers, communities and regional government agencies.

The race is on to save the Yellow-eared Parrot and ensure its survival into the third millennium.

Proyecto Ognorhynchus has been sponsored by the American Bird Conservancy, Loro Parque Fundación, Fonds für bedrohte Papageien, World Parrot Trust, Disney Wildlife Conservation Foundation, The Barbara Delano Foundation and Kaytee Avian Foundation and endorsement of SAO in Colombia. For further information on the project please consult www.proaxis.com/~salaman or contact Paul Salaman, email salaman@proaxis.com

The last home for the Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis*; where few palms and only scattered forest patches remain – reforestation has already commenced



Proyecto Ognorhynchus/Paul Salaman



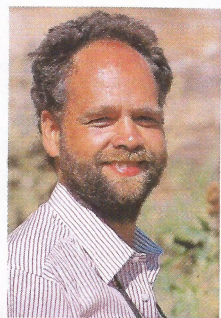
The sweet 'Gavilán' (*Verbenaceae*) fruits are rich pickings about the parrots roost site following the birds' daily long afternoon flight from the High Andes

Proyecto Ognorhynchus/Bernabé López-Lanús



Here today, gone tomorrow? These magical birds need our help.

Turning words into birds



As we prepare for the next one thousand years of conservation, the BirdLife Partnership is in a strong position. Over the last decades, BirdLife has identified the world's globally threatened birds and clearly laid

out – in Red Data Books (including, most recently *Threatened Birds of the Philippines*), Action Plans and other outputs – what needs to be done to conserve them. In the last ten years almost 10,000 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) have been identified world-wide with detailed, comprehensive accounts published and disseminated to those who conserve and manage these vitally important places.

Last year the Partnership adopted a five-year strategy, *BirdLife 2000*, and six regional programmes of conservation action that provide a clear framework of actions and targets for BirdLife and the wider conservation community. This year, BirdLife will publish *Threatened Birds of the World* (see *World Birdwatch* March 1999) and IBA inventories for Europe (see page 23) and Africa. These strategies, plans, books, papers, databases and reports have taken hours of work to compile and fill thousands of pages. Now is the time to turn these words into birds.

Here are five things you can do to help us in our fight to make the world a better place for birds and people: you probably do some of

them already, but I am sure you can find others and encourage them to follow suit.

1 Support the cause. Join the BirdLife Partner in your country and contribute to their appeals for globally important bird conservation actions.

2 Spread the message. Tell friends and colleagues about the state of the world's birds and how BirdLife is working for birds and people. Pass on *World Birdwatch* and other BirdLife publications to your colleagues. Perhaps you can interest them in subscribing to *World Birdwatch*?

3 'Adopt' a threatened species. You can sponsor your own threatened species in BirdLife's forthcoming book *Threatened Birds of the World* (see *World Birdwatch*, June 1999). Or why not join a threatened species working group?

4 Help save an IBA. More and more IBAs have local groups working for their protection. Such groups always need voluntary helpers, technical advice and support.

5 Join BirdLife campaigns. Over the next five years the Partnership will be running several global and regional campaigns on conservation issues of world-wide importance, such as the impact of longline fishing on seabird populations, as reported in *World Birdwatch* March 1999.

To play an active part in these and other BirdLife initiatives, keep in touch.

Michael Rands

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Director

World Birdwatch

March 2000 Volume 22 No. 1
ISSN 0144-4476

Editor Richard Thomas

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The views expressed are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of BirdLife International

Designed by Cottier and Sidaway
Printed by Warners, Bournemouth, Lincolnshire, UK

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UK registered charity no 1042125

BirdLife International is a world-wide partnership of conservation organisations working to protect the world's birds and their habitats

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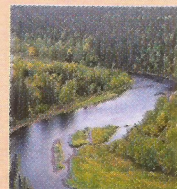
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(Photo: Greth Arnaud/BIOS)

World Birdwatch is available by subscription from BirdLife International at the above address and from some Partner organisations

World Birdwatch

Volume 22 Number 1

March 2000



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